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Teaching Research Rhetorically

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Abstract

At George Washington University, librarians and faculty have partnered to provide an effective introduction to information literacy to all freshmen. The structure of the new writing program promotes goals that are at the intersection of the Council of Writing Program Administrators and Association of College and Research Libraries. Furthermore, the structure maintains the collaboration and conversation among the two parties, promoting an on-going and evolving relationship.

Introduction

Just as writing cannot be taught without content, research cannot be taught as an isolated process, it ought to be integrated into the curriculum and specific assignments. James Elmborg (2003) states, "When the search process is defined as an isolated, discrete process built around finding and evaluating information, it is easy to lose sight of the way students experience the larger development of ideas that takes place in the college writing process, the way searching and finding function in the process of composing" (p. 72). To introduce information literacy in a manner that highlights this intersection between writing and research, the George Washington University implemented a new writing program in 2003. Librarians and faculty partner to teach research and writing in a new first-year course, University Writing 20, which then forms a basis for students to take further Writing in the Disciplines courses. Through the collaboration, librarians and faculty promote goals that are at the intersection of the Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA) and Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL); furthermore, the structure maintains the collaboration among the two parties, promoting an on-going and evolving relationship.

Epistemic and Recursive

Within the fields of both composition and library studies, professionals often must work against the common misperceptions that writing and research are simple tasks of gathering, organizing, and transferring to paper that which is already known. As Rolf Norgaard (2003) writes, professionals in both fields must confront the misperception that what they teach are "neutral" "skills":

these perceptions . . . remain in play regarding information literacy, despite the far more detailed and nuanced conceptions of information literacy in national standards and guidelines. . . . [Likewise] literacy debates in rhetoric and composition. . . [assert] that literacy must also be, perforce, cultural, and that any literacy worthy of the name must also be critical and self aware. As a consequence, literacy studies have taken an 'ecological' approach, and see all forms of literacy as deeply context-bound and as forms of social interaction and social construction. (p.125-126)

The scholarship of both composition studies and library studies points to the same conclusion: both writing and research should be understood as epistemic and recursive. They are ways of coming to know the world, of becoming conscious about what the student knows and how she knows it. They are ways of coming to understand how knowledge itself is made and shared, and they are ways of joining in that process. The epistemic and recursive nature of both writing and research are fully intertwined: more research can provide a new understanding of the rhetorical exigency of a project, which can, in turn, shift the purpose of the writing project in a new direction. Likewise, further writing – synthesizing, analyzing, and evaluating the research - can

provide a new understanding of what has been gathered, what voices are missing, and how more research might be conducted.

The view that writing and research are epistemic is advanced in the professional guidelines for both composition scholars (as seen in the Council of Writing Program Administrator's "Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition" document) and for librarians (as seen in the Association of College and Research Libraries "Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education.")

In the WPA document, writing is a way to think critically and, through writing, to arrive at as well as to share one's new understandings. The WPA document lists four main categories of outcomes for a first-year writing class: Rhetorical Knowledge; Critical Thinking, Reading, and Writing; Processes; and Knowledge of Conventions. The WPA recommends that by the end of the first year, students should "use writing and reading for inquiry, learning, thinking, and communicating" and "understand writing as an open process that permits writers to use later invention and re-thinking to revise their work." In addition, the WPA advocates that students gain a larger awareness about claims of knowledge and the language in which those claims are made: they should "understand the relationships among language, power, and knowledge." The ability to conduct good research is embedded in each of these domains. Students should "integrate their own ideas with those of others" and "understand a writing assignment as a series of tasks, including finding, evaluating, analyzing, and synthesizing appropriate primary and secondary sources."

Likewise, the Standards of Information Literacy Competency set forth by ACRL emphasize that information literacy is about much more than accessing information. Research, like writing, is epistemic: we do not merely collect information to confirm a pre-held belief; we gather information to complicate a pre-held belief, to test it out, to learn new methods of thinking about it. Standard Three, for example, reads, "The information literate student evaluates information and its sources and incorporates selected information in his or her knowledge base and value system" (11). Research, like writing is not simply a matter of accomplishing a task, but is a process that can restructure the writer/researcher's larger worldview and knowledge base.

As is true of the writing process, research abilities are neither separate nor linear; "many of the competencies are likely to be performed recursively, in that the reflective and evaluative aspects included within each standard will require the student to return to an earlier point in the process, revise the information-seeking approach, and repeat the same steps" (ACRL 6).

Context-Rich Instruction

Both composition studies and information literacy studies fight the misperception that students need only brief, standard exercises in order to fill a "simple deficit" in students' past learning. To fight this misperception, Norgaard says that "libraries need writing and writing programs as a way to 'rhetorize' information literacy. Rhetorically informed approaches to writing underscore the ways in which language and persuasion are inevitably situated and contingent, with communication dependent on the rhetorical contexts in which it occurs" (p. 126). ACRL recommends that information literacy be taught within problem-based learning courses, where students are "required to become skilled users of information sources in many locations and formats, thereby increasing their responsibility for their own learning" (5). Furthermore, ACRL emphasizes that students learn information literacy best when such teaching is tied closely with content: "achieving competency in information literacy requires an understanding that this cluster of abilities is not extraneous to the curriculum, but is woven into the curriculum's content, structure, and sequence" (5).

Karen Spear explains that many writing programs choose to introduce rhetorical concepts through topic-based classes because "a topic gives students something to write about, presumably something they will be interested in. With an interesting topic, the

course can avoid the problems of conventional writing courses in which the teacher must dummy up assignments and reasons to write them” (330). An integral part of such courses is the recognition that “topics do not exist in isolation; they are defined by particular academic disciplines or interest groups; ‘discourse community’ has become the standard term” (Spear 330). Composition scholars such as Patricia Bizzell, Kenneth Bruffee, and David Bartholomae emphasize that to enter into a discourse community—to learn to write and speak as a participant there—one learns the conventions inscribed in that discourse, “the commonplaces, the texts, the gestures and jargon, the interpretive schemes of a group” (Bartholomae, 1983, 300). To enter the discourse community of academic writers, one also needs to learn the research conventions of scholars and to recognize how research conventions differ across the university. What counts as “good evidence” in one field is not appropriate in another; one looks for materials for different disciplines in different places and with different methods. Therefore, courses designed to introduce students to the “discourse communities” surrounding particular topics prepare them to see the rhetoricity in writing and research.

University Writing Program

The George Washington University has designed its University Writing Program so as to emphasize the “rhetoricity” of writing and research: sections of the first-year writing course, UW20, are organized around course topics, so that students are immersed within a particular intellectual context with a community of peer-scholars. Faculty focus on the rhetorical, analytical process by which a person identifies the expectations of particular discourse communities: we teach students how to read critically in order to enter into the conversations of that community. Furthermore, each writing course is linked with a University librarian, who works collaboratively with the writing instructor to integrate information literacy appropriate to each course topic and to help stress the point that expectations and processes of information literacy also are context-based concepts.

The course template that guides our UW20 course—a template that was developed in 2002 by an interdisciplinary faculty, librarian, and administration Writing Task Force—highlights the interrelation between content, genre conventions, and writing. UW20 faculty are expected to teach courses with rigorous content that introduces students to academic writing; at the same time, specific definitions of “academic writing” are left open, so that they can be adjusted according to the specific topic of the section. While one assignment must incorporate research, composition professors determine the specific genres for each section depending on their sense of how best to sequence assignments appropriate to their topic.

This approach is based upon the assumption that good writing and good research happen when students consider the writing/research process within a particular context, with a particular purpose, and with a particular audience. When students learn to identify the rhetorical situation that shapes their writing and research, they come to see writing and research processes as a repertoire of strategies that can be employed as necessary in response to particular demands of the rhetorical situation. Writing and research must be flexible and shifting to meet the demands of the larger process.

Course topics for the first-year writing course, UW20, vary widely. Current and past examples of course themes with short descriptions can be found on the program website. Some sample course titles from the Spring 2005 semester include: Legacies of the Holocaust; Mucho Macho: Latin American Sexualities; Dear Diary – You’ve Been Blogged: Journaling, Journalism, and Politics in the 21st Century; I’m Game! Exploring the Art, Science and Economics of Electronic Games.

UW20 is only one part of the new University Writing Program, however. After taking UW20, students are required to take two Writing in the Disciplines (WID) courses before they graduate. Therefore, while UW20 teaches students to write within the context of the particular discourse communities surrounding each course themes, the course also must operate as a pre-disciplinary

course. To prepare students for the range of disciplinary approaches they may encounter in their WID classes, the First-Year Writing Program has taken the approach advocated by Lee Ann Carroll (2002) in her longitudinal study of college writing. She argues that while there is no such thing as the “generic academic essay,” students entering college can count on having to develop new habits of literacy and taking on new roles in relation to the knowledge that they encounter. She describes these new habits as:

including reading and evaluating difficult texts that offer diverse viewpoints on complex issues, locating and then making sense of the overwhelming volume of information available through paper and digital sources, integrating new knowledge with personal experience and values, understanding and employing the new genres of writing, and writing as an “expert” for an often critical audience. (119)

In addition to these general concepts, faculty design their courses to introduce students to some of the distinctions among academic disciplines. Students are expected to find research from a range of fields and integrate them in their final writing projects. Students investigate both general and subject specific article databases, which allows them to find resources from a variety of disciplines and provides the opportunity to talk about how discourse communities structure research methods.

Structuring Faculty-Librarian Collaboration

The faculty and librarian collaboration is infused from the very beginning of course planning. The collaboration begins during summer faculty development workshops, usually held in mid-August. Faculty and librarians discuss the definition of research, what constitutes research, and types of research resources. They work in small groups to share course topics, potential assignments, and research resources. Faculty continue to consult their librarian as they further develop their assignments, leading to discussions of resources and integration of library instruction sessions. Library instruction session goals and objectives are collaboratively planned to coordinate with concrete research tasks. Faculty and librarians continue to discuss the needs of students throughout the semester, leading to open lab sessions, individual conferences between librarians and students, and librarian-led discussion forums on Blackboard. At the end of each semester, they review the semester together and suggest changes to assignments and instruction sessions for future semesters.

Our interest in developing a capacious view of academic writing guides not only the course design in the Writing Program; it also means that we seek out and value a diverse range of experience in the colleagues we hire. Faculty teaching first-year writing are recruited from a range of disciplines. Again, a look at the program website reveals this diversity: UW20 faculty have doctorates in history, philosophy, folklore, American studies, literature, rhetoric and composition, Caribbean studies, Mass Communications, Women’s Studies, and more. Instruction librarians share this diversity of background: political science, journalism, English, art history, landscape architecture and more. Whether or not they have subject specializations, librarians’ training is inherently eclectic and epitomizes interdisciplinarity. Their knowledge of key resources in a broad range of fields and searching agility across all disciplines complement the research competencies of faculty.

Through collaboration and on-going conversations, this mix of academic specialties within the program leads to cross-checking of assumptions about academic writing. Faculty who have been immersed in a particular kind of academic writing may be tempted to extrapolate general claims about academic writing from their own experiences; however, working closely with colleagues from other fields means that these extrapolations bump up against the experiences of their colleagues, and the resulting clash leads to further, multi-disciplinary and meta-disciplinary analysis “academic writing.” The program is designed, then, to be a constant site of inquiry about the larger discourse community of academic research and writing.

The collaboration is also program- and university-wide. The library instruction coordinator currently chairs the University Writing Advisory Council (UWAC). UWAC is charged with advising the Executive Director of the Writing Program and the Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs, as well as with advocating for the program. UWAC consists of elected members representing each undergraduate college and the library. Within the University Writing

Program, a standing committee on the library, which consists of at least three faculty members and one librarian, promotes the effective integration of the pedagogical and research needs of the faculty and librarians. When the Writing Program conducts faculty searches, and when the library conducts searches for instructional librarians, both faculty and librarians attend the job talks and interviews for the candidates. Writing faculty also serve on the Faculty Senate Committee on the Library.

Conclusion

The collaboration between the Instructional Librarians and the University Writing faculty at The George Washington University is an innovative and productive model for teaching research writing. Because of the deliberate and on-going collaboration between the librarians and the faculty, the first-year writing course teaches students a complex level of information literacy. Research activities are integrated thoroughly in a rhetorical framework: the recursive and epistemic nature of writing and research is reinforced throughout the semester. The faculty-librarian collaboration at George Washington University is, itself, epistemic and recursive—a site where professionals who care deeply about pedagogy, language, and critical thinking deliberate about these concepts to create and re-create best practices in teaching academic research and writing.

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